New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 20 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 26, 1953

1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1952 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Bernardine	231
Children's Hour (The)	151
Deep Blue Sea (The)	207
*Dial M for Murder	215
Evening with Beatrice Lillie (An)	254
Male Animal (The)	297
Mrs. McThing	359
My Darlin' Aida	218
New Faces of 1952	278
Pal Joey	398
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186
Time of the Cuckoo (The)	235
Time Out for Ginger	177
Two's Company	157
Whistler's Grandmother	160
*Wish You Were Here	266

1951 Vol.

Fourposter (The)	190
*King and I (The)	304
Moon Is Blue (The)	322

1950 Vol.

*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 26, 1953*

1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1953

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Anna Russell and Her Little Show	289
Bat (The)	390
Be Your Age	397
Bleak House	315
Camino Real	330
*Can-Can	304
Carnival in Flanders	286
Crucible (The)	383
Date With April (A)	318
Emperor's Clothes (The)	368
*End as a Man	250
*Fifth Season (The)	380
*Frogs of Spring (The)	247
Hazel Flagg	362
Horses in Midstream	325
John Brown's Body	358
*Ladies of the Corridor (The)	244
*Late Love	258
*Little Hut (The)	262
Love of Four Colonels (The)	394
Love's Labour's Lost	372
Maggie	351
*Me and Juliet	298
Men of Distinction	307
Merchant of Venice (The)	340
Mid-Summer	386
Misalliance	354
*My 3 Angels	334
Oklahoma!	294
On Borrowed Time	365
*Picnic	348
Pin to See the Peepshow (A)	278
Pink Elephant (The)	312
*Porgy and Bess	337
Red Rainbow (A)	281
Room Service	322
Strong Are Lonely (The)	269
*Take a Giant Step	274
*Tea and Sympathy	266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254
Touchstone	375
*Wonderful Town	344

CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD 320

Theatre Openings
"The Frogs of Spring"
"The Ladies of the Corridor"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 26, 1953*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Ladies of the Corridor"

DAILY NEWS

October 22, 1953

'Ladies of the Corridor' a Pathetic But Unexciting Group of Widows

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The hazard inherent in the slice-of-life technique of playwriting is that the slices may turn out to be just so much salami—and this is what happened to "The Ladies of the Corridor," which had its premiere last evening at the Longacre Theatre.

The authors, Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau, view with grave concern the plight of manless women. Most of the women have acquired their solitude by becoming widows, but one of them has become a loner simply because she couldn't stand her husband and had to leave him. Both Mrs. Parker and Mr. d'Usseau seem to agree that a dame without a man is a blighted soul. I don't go along with them this far, but I do admit after patiently attending the two acts of "The Ladies of the Corridor" that a dame without a man isn't very interesting.

About 20 years ago Vicki Baum and Max Reinhardt discovered in Berlin that the perfect but obvious place for a slice-of-life drama is a hotel, and a very good play, "Grand Hotel," was the result. "Ladies of the Corridor" hasn't the heroic intentions and dramatic force of the Baum work; it is a collection of sentimental sketches about several yearning widows and one man-hater who has turned to drink.

Second Act Better.

Not until the second half does the play gather momentum. Here it tells about Betty Field, the one who has left her man on purpose. Miss Field becomes a drunkard and does the Dutch act out of the hotel window after a long and highly sentimental conversation with herself. It also tells about Frances Starr, a chair-ridden invalid who, lacking a husband because he died and needing to dominate some other male, takes spiritual and dreadful possession of her son, Shepperd Strudwick.

Another of the ladies of the corridor is a widow of the chirky or gallant type who won't take bereavement standing up. She, Edna Best, falls in love with a younger man and has a nice time until he (Walter Matthau) realizes that she is older than he is and, if possible, duller.

An Admirable Cast.

All of the performances are graceful and skilled under the direction of Harold Clurman—and Clurman has quite a cast to work with, counting Mmes. Field, Starr, Best, June Walker and Margaret Barker. I thought Miss Barker was the most interesting of the lot because she didn't give a hoot about being a maiden lady; she got herself a good job in a store. Work, apparently, is a good solution of the sex problem.

There are some touching moments and some funny lines in "Ladies of the Corridor," and it has been most handsomely mounted in sets designed by Ralph Alswang. But it is my general conclusion that all the unseen husbands involved are better off dead or deserted.

"THE LADIES OF THE CORRIDOR"

Play by Dorothy Parker and Arnaud D'Usseau; staged by Harold Clurman; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by Walter Fried at the Longacre Theatre, October 21, 1953. The cast:

Mr. Humphries.....Robert Van Hooton
Mrs. Gordon.....June Walker
Mrs. Lauterbach....Vera Allen
Mrs. Nichols....Frances Starr
Charles Nichols.....Shepperd Strudwick
Harry.....Lonny Chapman
Casey.....Louis Criss
Lulu Ames.....Edna Best
Sassy.....Tassie
Mildred Tynan.....Betty Field
Robert Ames....Clement Brace
Betsy Ames.....Carol Wheeler
Constance Mercer.....Margaret Barker
Irma.....Kate Harkin
Paul Osgood....Walter Matthau
Tom Linscott....Donald McKee
Mary Linscott.....Harriet MacGibbon

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 22, 1953

THEATER

'The Ladies of the Corridor'

By WALTER F. KERR

Widows' Walk

THERE are three brilliant—and, I may say, blood-curdling—performances in the new play at the Longacre. Dorothy Parker and Arnaud D'Usseau are conducting a caustic, searing and extremely thorough investigation into the lives of hotel widows. Their "Ladies of the Corridor" are women whose men have died or gone straying, those matrons who haunt the lounges of dusty brown hostelries and who fill their vacant days with trips to the movies, to the five-and-ten, and to the lending libraries—when they are not taking off after more frightening pleasures.

As the authors narrow their focus to three particularly harrowing cases, the stage leaps into crackling life.

Edna Best is cast as Lulu Ames, late of the sticks, determined not to make a nuisance of herself with her children, happy enough that her husband is dead, and wholly alive to the romantic possibilities of New York. She is—in Miss Best's stunning portrait—a woman who is blithely candid about her age ("oh, we went to school together a hundred years ago"). She is possessed of infinite grace and a good bit of self-knowledge. And she is—tragically—altogether helpless when it comes to managing her last chance at a life with love in it.

• • •

The actress rounds out a complex portrait with fascinating ease: smiling a quick, noncommittal smile when she is embarrassed, tilting her chin imperiously when she wishes to be at her most charming, and clutching at an escaping male with a tigerish venom that is shattering. All of Lulu Ames is here, and all of Lulu Ames is wonderful.

No less compelling is Frances Starr's charmer in a wheelchair, a mother who has all but eaten her son alive, who is prepared to blackmail him in order to keep him by her side, and whose very solicitude is an intolerable form of nagging. Again a many-faceted character comes dazzlingly clear: honest affection, terror for the future, and a willingness to lacerate her own flesh and blood are all part of a single, terrifying image.

• • •

And Betty Field brings great directness, simplicity, and quiet power to the play's least necessary—and least credible—role. Miss Field is seen as a cast-off wife with very little confidence, a lass who has taken to the bottle and long lonesome hours in a third-rate room. The authors have not been very clear in explaining this girl's predicament, and the actress is compelled to fight her way through a lugubrious soliloquy which ends in sudden suicide. But Miss Field is one of the most luminous actresses on our stage today, and she is swiftly touching in spite of the melodramatic burden she must carry.

There are other shrewd and sharply styled performances: Margaret Barker's no-nonsense "working girl" with a clear eye and an edge to her voice; Walter Matthau's amiable but restless lover to the unfortunate Lulu Ames; June Walker's Southern biddy with a minor talent for kleptomania; Shepperd Strudwick's forlorn, anguished male nurse.

• • •

Indeed, every one is in perfect form under Harold Clurman's almost sadistically accurate stage direction. Mr. Clurman lets no character get away from him. He pins each of them down with a merciless honesty, leaving us with a memorable gallery of recognizable grotesques. And Ralph Alswang's settings whip us through a variety of rooms in the Hotel Marlowe with swift and striking skill.

The play is by no means perfect. Miss Parker and Mr. D'Usseau have made their point plain rather too often than is necessary—in the lines, in the superabundance of personal stories, and in the final succession of crushing blows which fell three attractive people. In the last few scenes each catastrophe must be illustrated, and the burden becomes almost as great on the audience as it does on the residents of the Marlowe. Further cutting would help even now.

But for all the sorrow which the play elaborately details, "The Ladies of the Corridor" has the saving grace of humor. Its quips are frequent, its movement is rapid, and—above all—its characters are stingingly vivid.

The New York Times

October 22, 1953

Edna Best and Betty Field Are Starred in 'The Ladies of the Corridor'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In "The Ladies of the Corridor," which was acted at the Longacre last evening, Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau insist on pointing out that unattached ladies of venerable years are pathetic and lonely creatures. Unfortunately, nearly everybody knows that without having to go to the theatre. "The Ladies of the Corridor" goes to considerable trouble to reiterate the obvious. On the whole it is a loosely contrived play with more stock ideas in it than you would expect from Miss Parker and Mr. d'Usseau.

* * *

But that is a long way from closing the case. For the cast of actresses is a brilliant one and some of the scenes are extremely well played. For instance Edna Best is cast as a wealthy widow who settles down in a New York hotel to enjoy her declining years amid exciting surroundings. Much to her surprise she falls in love for the first time in her life and with an engaging young man played by Walter Matthau.

Like most of the situations in "The Ladies of the Corridor," this is not exactly an original one. But it is a very illuminating one because Miss Best plays her part with so much insight, quickness of mind and glow of spirit, and because Mr. Matthau is excellent too. Miss Best has style and shining intelligence. The play suddenly comes to life when she starts moving into it.

* * *

There are some other sound assets in other parts of the play. As a lady confined to a wheelchair, Frances Starr also plays with spirit. A character that looks colorless in the early scenes becomes an admirable human being with strength of mind by the time Miss Starr has finished her portrait. Betty Field is cast in the hackneyed part of a lonely dipsomaniac who embraces defenestration, as it is called, in the final scene. But Miss Field, also, is a splendid actress with a sensitive understanding and the gift for conveying it in terms of acting. She gives "The Ladies of the Corridor" some moments of distinction along the way.

As director, Harold Clurman has done one of his most painstaking jobs in this production. There is not a slovenly line in the acting or staging. Shepperd Strudwick, as a well-bred nonentity; Margaret Barker, as a widow who has found a career; June Walker and Vera Allen, as hotel gossips; Lonny Chapman, as a bellboy with a personality of his own; Clement Brace, as a son reluctant to offend his wife and unhappy about disappointing his mother—these actors give excellent performances. Of course, the authors are entitled to credit for having written parts that can be acted so well.

But they have very little to say about lonely women that a playgoer might not carry into the theatre with him before the curtain is raised. That time weighs heavy on their hands? That most of them are commonplace and without talent? That a certain amount of sadness lurks somewhere in their hearts? That they watch each other like hawks?

All these things are obviously true. But on the basis of past performances in the theatre, magazines and books, Miss Parker and Mr. d'Usseau look comparatively destitute of ideas in this drama. It is long and phlegmatic. Ralph Alswang has designed a series of settings that express the impersonal solidity of a residential hotel where unattached women in their mature years go through the motions of being alive. Mr. Alswang's settings are good ones; they provide a pleasant change of scene without much effort. They give "The Ladies of the Corridor" the form of a play. Miss Parker and Mr. d'Usseau have kept the content hackneyed.

Daily Mirror

October 22, 1953

'Ladies of the Corridor' Notable on 2 Counts

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Ladies of the Corridor," which Walter Fried brought to the Longacre Theatre last evening, is notable on at least two counts. Its premiere restored the Longacre, too long devoted to radio and television, to the legit column. And it has a star-studded cast.

AUTHORS DOROTHY PARKER and Arnaud d'Usseau have written about the women, young and old, who haunt the corridors of New York hotels. They are particularly interested in those living in the Marlowe, somewhere in the East 60s. The springboard for their play was a quotation from T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney Erect."

There's Lulu Ames. She feels that her late husband had been unfaithful to her almost from the day of their marriage. He had not been in love with another woman, but with his business. Her son is a promising lawyer, with a wife and small children, who cannot find much time to devote to her.

In her loneliness, Lulu finds a measure of happiness with a book dealer 12 years her junior. But she is much too possessive. She not only demands his affection but an accounting of his movements throughout the day. After he walks out on her, she comes to realize that the only thing worse than loneliness is the fear of loneliness.

There's Mrs. Nichols, a Hetty Green when it comes to making money, who keeps her middle-aged son bound to her apron strings. When it looks as though he will obtain another teaching job and leave her, she holds over his head a previous scandal in which he had been an innocent party.

There are the Mrs. Gordon and Lauterbach, who find diversion in gossip and the movies. There's Constance Mercer, who has become a successful business woman. And there is young Mrs. Tynan, reduced to solitary drinking by a brutal husband and her inability to cope with life, who jumps out of a window.

"The Ladies of the Corridor" is a less absorbing episodic approximation of "Grand Hotel." It has terrifying moments, amusing moments, but they never develop the emotional, dramatic impact of the Vicki Baum hit. The lives of its people, their brief and varied stories, never jell toward unity, toward an effective whole.

Edna Best is at her best as the Mrs. Ames who tries but cannot recapture youth. Walter Matthau is excellent as the bookseller who seeks to understand her viewpoint. Frances Starr is fine as the demanding mother, and Shepperd Strudwick quite moving as her frustrated son.

Margaret Barker brings a buoyant note to the proceedings as a breezy and resourceful widow. June Walker and Vera Allen merit salutes as two flighty, gossipy residents. Betty Field, one of our favorite actresses, makes the most of a couple of harrowing drunk scenes. Lonny Chapman, Robert Van Hooton, Clement Brace, Carol Wheeler, Kate Harkin, Donald McKee and Harriet MacGibbon also deserve mention.

Director Harold Clurman has staged the individual scenes admirably, but, even with the assistance of Ralph Alswang's speedily changing sets, has not been able to hit the target with the script's scattered shots. Miss Parker and d'Usseau, it seems to us, would have been wiser to eliminate several characters and concentrate their attention on the really important ones. On Mrs. Ames and her problem, for instance.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

October 22, 1953

Top-Line Roles Fill 'Corridor'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

If ever anybody devised a three-ring circus for actresses, "Ladies of the Corridor" is it. The drama by Dorothy Parker and Arnold D'Usseau, which brought the Longacre back to legitimate theater last night, is an episodic affair filled with juicy roles.

This is an inside tour of a small residential hotel in Manhattan's Sixties, mainly occupied by lone females, widows of one kind or another. They are character studies, whose principal value is the theatrical chances they offer the performers.

Shallow Romantic.

Edna Best leads the billing in the one transitional role of the play. She resists the tentacles of loneliness, the lending library books, nightly movies and petty gossip. But being a shallow romantic, she quickly grows possessive and loses what is surely her last beau.

Miss Best has an uncanny way of acting a role with perfect sincerity while letting you know how contemptuous and comical she feels the character really is. Here she triumphs as a woman of beauty and outward sophistication, who is an unrealistic bore when the cards are down.

Betty Field has drawn an unusual tour de force to play, in an alcoholic wife who has quit a sadistic husband, yet has no equipment for making any life of her own. The part is composed in such concentrated scenes that there is not much the actress can do but hit for a homer, which she does.

Frances Starr plays a woman crippled with arthritis, whose hold over her son is a terrifyingly cruel story, until it turns to pure melodrama for its payoff. Neither

"The Ladies of the Corridor"—*continued*

Miss Starr, with her subtle flirting manner, nor Shepperd Strudwick as the tragic son, need the broad, wild complications that close their story.

Walter Matthau plays the young, last beau of Miss Best with humor and strength. He has some of the best Dorothy Parker lines in the script, and delivers them neatly.

June Walker makes an extraordinarily thorough picture of one of the hallroom girls who decks her boredom with a Southern accent and a leaning toward minor kleptomania. Vera Allen is her pal, unwanted by her children, because of her corny timidity.

Fringes of Bitterness.

Margaret Barker makes a clean-cut portrait of the only working woman in the hotel. She is lonely and knows fringes of bitterness, but at least has a function in life.

"Ladies of the Corridor" is not a pretty play, but it is very acute and often bites with wit. It has a realistic production by Ralph Alswang, which seems to involve endless, full stage sets, neatly exchanged.

You may come away from it with a warning about how people should plan their lives. But more impressive will be the memories of the fireworks. Miss Best humiliating herself in grief as she loses her lover, Miss Field thudding words of pale courage into her own ears, Miss Starr delivering her inhuman, ladylike threats, and Miss Walker dropping deft germs of destruction on the trail of reputations down the hall.

New York Post

October 22, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Tragic Widows of Manhattan

In "The Ladies of the Corridor," Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau have looked with pity and terror into the lives of quiet desperation led by some lonely and aging widows in a gloomy New York hotel. The result of their sympathetic observations, which opened last night at the Longacre Theater, is a play at once arresting and harrowing that is almost continuously absorbing, less effective at the end than it is at the halfway mark, and about as depressing an adventure in the drama as one could readily imagine. It is not for those seeking a merry evening.

Although "The Ladies of the Corridor" is not strictly a thesis play, its authors do have a point to make. It is that when widowhood, either by death or divorce, comes to a middle-aged American woman, only one prepared for a career has any chance for happiness. Their only contented lady has taken up interior decorating as a profession, and, while she finds problems in connection with her job, she has discovered satisfaction in it, too. The others are bitter, frustrated, bored, and driven to suicide, kleptomania or constant attendance at the movies.

Three Women

In particular, the dramatists are concerned with three of the women. One takes a younger lover and, despite her momentary happiness, proceeds to drive him from her by her nagging doubts of his fidelity. Another becomes a solitary drinker, has a sordid affair with a bellhop and ends by jumping from a window. The third is an invalid who wrecks the life of her son by blackmailing him into serving her. The kleptomaniac and the woman seeking refuge in the movies from her knowledge that her children don't want her are less dramatic figures, but they add to the drab and hopeless picture of doomed widowhood.

"The Ladies of the Corridor" is an episodic drama, a sort of "Grand Hotel" of widowhood, and it shifts from one to another of its melancholy heroines in its stern and pitiful contemplations. Chiefly, though, it is preoccupied with the case of the widow with the younger lover, and it is only in the scenes dealing with her that it has any moments of lightness and a hint of hope in the ending. Here the play seems to me at its most successful, particularly since these episodes are so skillfully played by Edna Best and Walter Matthau.

Catalogue of Gloom

While "The Ladies of the Corridor" is to a great extent a catalogue of feminine gloom, it is clear that a vast amount of insight, compassion and genuine skill at character-drawing has gone into it. Only the invalid seems something of a monster; the others, even when they are far from likeable, are observed with such understanding that they become authentically pitiful in their plight. There is a lot of theatrical effectiveness in the writing, the acting and Harold Clurman's staging, and, although the drama is more depressing than moving, it is difficult not to have respect for the honesty and thoroughness of its observation.

Although Miss Best and Mr. Matthau are particularly good in their characterizations, the performances are excellent throughout. There is especially skillful playing by Betty Field as the alcoholic, Frances Starr as the invalid, Shepperd Strudwick as her trapped son, Lonny Chapman as the bellhop, and Margaret Barker as the successful career woman. Ralph Alswang's settings add greatly to the creation of the proper atmosphere. The realistic drama is to be found in an exceedingly glum mood in "The Ladies of the Corridor," but it does have power.

Journal-American

October 22, 1953

Play Has Depth And Emotion

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE fate of lonely women, living in faded luxury in side street New York hotels, has been woven by Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau into a drama of enormous depth and emotional appeal.

In "The Ladies of the Corridor," which opened at the Longacre Theatre last night, we see the full flower of Mrs. Parker's profound and incisive preoccupation with the frailties of her sex, the tragedy and desperation that assail a world of women without men.

The ladies are neither rich nor poor, but they suffer from the mutual malady of boredom; their hours are filled with the small details of destroying time. There are some who manage to escape the barrier, but there is always the suggestion that the corridor is waiting there to claim them in the end.

Told in Episodes

The authors have told this story by means of a series of unrelated episodes in the lives of a group of women living in a small hotel in the East Sixties.

There are June Walker and Vera Allen, two ladies frankly resigned to an existence of borrowed books, excursions to the hairdresser and the movies, and long vigils in the lobby.

There is Frances Starr, an invalid, who has blackmailed her son into a life of servitude; Betty Field, who seeks escape in drink and sordid love affairs; Margaret Barker, who has solved her problem, at least temporarily with a business career and, finally, Edna Best, who tries fiercely to retain happiness in an ill-fated romance with a younger man.

There are scenes of immense stature throughout: Miss Best with her son and his progressive young wife; Miss Best and Miss Barker with the folks from the old home town, and the truly great sequence in which Miss Best, through her wild insistence on hanging onto Walter Matthau, succeeds only in losing him.

There is also the highly emotional moment when Miss Starr calmly informs Shepperd Strudwick, her son, that she will reveal an unsavory chapter from his past rather than allow him ever to leave her. And a final, pathetic episode in the brief and muddled life of Betty Field.

Many Good Lines

All these are written with as much perception, intelligence and fine regard for structure as anything within recent American theatrical history. There are countless lines worth remembering, many exquisitely humorous in the best Parker rabbit-punch tradition.

Edna Best has probably never had a part closer to her heart, and this is evident in her entirely engaging performance; Betty Field retains a fine restraint in the role of the tragic dipso, and Walter Matthau, June Walker, Vera Allen, Frances Starr, Margaret Barker, Shepperd Strudwick and Lonny Chapman are equally and admirably suited to their tasks.

I should say that Harold Clurman has done a superb job as director, but it must be admitted that he had quite a hunk of talent to work with.

This is another solid success—the season looks brighter.

"The Frogs of Spring"

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

October 21, 1953

'Frogs' Keeps the Joint Jumpin'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Frogs of Spring" is a gentle, human and very humorous account of small-town life in the big city.

Sly and sophisticated, the Broadhurst Theater play recites the adventures of two families in adjoining Manhattan houses, who decide to remove the fence which splits their backyard.

The new intimacy sends the two men on a wild flight of lubricated fancy which loses one of them his job. It sets the wives to a near bearing of fangs. And it generally confuses the children.

Sweet Sorrow.

In the end it is parting that makes them all realize they deeply treasure the friendship they have not always enjoyed.

Nathaniel Benchley has written this saga with a rare sense of unastonished ludicrousness. His characters can voice the most remarkable irrelevancies, or indulge in the most outlandish acts. But since they invite no particular comment of surprise from their associates, the people never become eccentrics. They are simply doing and saying the sort of thing most people in their position think.

Burgess Meredith has caught a quite wonderful tone for this sort of comedy. He carefully preserves the air of normality. The result is that the characters are recognizable while they are theatrical.

Husbands' Play.

The two husbands bear the brunt of the action as they casually hit a communal bottle and make their high-flown plans for the backyard. When they finally beset it with a monstrous swimming pool the object seems as logical as, if more filling than, a daffodil.

Anthony Ross can look as harassed as anybody in the theater, and when he has a hangover to deal with delicately he is hilarious. Hiram Sherman has a more sneaking style. His timing of a single "No!" or just a horrified glance at a nosy neighbor child can set up a comic reaction to relish long afterward.

The two wives as played by Haila Stoddard and Barbara Baxley are attractive and long-suffering without entirely losing their sense of humor. In fact they top their husbands' antics with some fancy work on a tank of helium which makes them sound like Donald Duck, fine fun for a lagging cocktail party.

Deceptive Play.

Jerome Kilty is delightfully pompous as a beery Irish neighbor, and there is a fascinatingly innocent and funny courtship conducted by Mary Grace Canfield and Fred Gwynne. There are some other highly amusing moments provided by Roland Wood as the bringer of the helium, and young Kevin Coughlin as a very forward climber of walls.

"The Frogs of Spring" is a deceptive play. It rarely bids to make you roar with laughter. Its big impression is an accumulative one, of zany moments in the lives of some agreeable people, who every once in a while have to indulge frankly in some irresponsible behavior.

The flavor of it all is very good and the craftsmanship is excellent. It makes an evening that is a happy memory.

"THE FROGS OF SPRING"

Comedy by Nathaniel Benchley; staged by Burgess Meredith; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Alvin Colt; presented by Lyn Austin and Thomas Noyes in association with Robert Radnitz and Robert Sagalyn at the Broadhurst Theatre, October 20, 1953. The cast:

John Allen...Malcolm Brodrick
Chris Allen.....Kenneth Kakos
Bobby Belden.....Billy Quinn
Danny Shaw.....Kevin Coughlin
Kay Allen.....Haila Stoddard
Virginia Belden..Barbara Baxley
James Allen.....Anthony Ross
Alice Kemp.....
Mary Grace Canfield
Charles Belden..Hiram Sherman
Luther Raubel....Fred Gwynne
Dr. Lindquist.....Roland Wood
Asa McK. Gelwicks.....
Jerome Kilty

New York Herald Tribune

October 21, 1953

THEATER

'The Frogs of Spring'

By WALTER F. KERR

Manhattan Idyll

Breathes there a man with soul so dead he hasn't remembered some of the crazy things he and his cronies used to do, and thereupon murmured "Boy, what a great play those times would make!"

In "The Frogs of Spring," which opened at the Broadhurst Tuesday, Nathaniel Benchley seems to be mulling over just such idle and waggish memories. They don't make a great play. In fact, they don't make a play at all.

What they do make is a series of casually cockeyed vignettes—offhand in tone, offbeat in humor and every once in a while unpredictably funny.

• • •

Mr. Benchley's special interest is a couple of white-collar neighbors who live in adjoining New York apartments and who spend a great deal of time tilting beer cans as they talk to one another over a rickety back fence. These middle-aged boys have a lot in common. Both are full of all sorts of useless information (one of them knows how to kill an octopus), both are given to literary quotation (the sight of a swimming pool stirs the other to a solemn rendition of "I must go down to the seas again"), and both are convinced that a little bit of country can be brought to the city's backyards.

They have been frustrated in their desire to build a tree-house for the children. But as the evening progresses they nerve themselves to certain innovations. The fence comes down. A decidely unsafe stilt-house is erected. A vast swimming tank is surreptitiously installed while their wives are away. And the harmony which has reigned between the Beldens and the Allens withers noticeably under all the improvements.

• • •

The disillusion which overtakes these earnest admirers of Thoreau is punctuated, in the writing, with some fresh, dry observation and some droll character nonsense. Mr. Benchley has developed, for instance, an admirably accurate relationship between his parents and his children. Basically, they despise one another. The kids ask only not to be forced to climb into the stilt-house which has laboriously been prepared for them. (They are also of the opinion that their parents drink quite a lot). The parents, on their side, stare at their progeny in candid dismay—speechless, baffled, all but revolted. Mr. Benchley's inventiveness is attractive, too, in a mournful secondary love story between a couple of hangdog, beetle-browed servants.

• • •

The playing—as well as Burgess Meredith's stage direction—makes the most of the author's relaxed and fragmentary whimsies. Hiram Sherman, as a good neighbor willing to sacrifice wife and job to the joys of backyard amity, stares blandly, sways slightly, and considers the most improbable propositions with an intense seriousness. His deep concern over the romantizations of conventional history ("Those northeastern fur trappers were a pretty shabby bunch") and his drunken mooning over a sentimental tombstone are delightful patches in a steadily amusing performance. Anthony Ross is agreeable as his fresh-air companion. Haila Stoddard and Barbara Baxley are crisp and knowing as a pair of patient wives, and Roland Wood has a bright, brief bit as he discourses owlishly on the hazards of taking helium straight.

• • •

What must finally be said about "The Frogs of Spring," though, is that fine as the brief bits are, they remain just bits in an evening that gains no momentum. Having originated as a series of light sketches in The New Yorker, they bring their sketchiness with them. The curtain rises on one late-afternoon mood, the characters play around with a snatch of attractive, but never very urgent dialogue, the curtain drops—and the pattern begins all over again. Nor has Mr. Benchley yet got hold of the dramatist's

trick of expanding, and then exploding, a promising farce situation. He makes gestures in this direction: with a tank of helium which produces remarkable vocal effects when inhaled, with a useful swimming pool which is never really used, with a drunk scene which begins in gay irrelevance and then slowly trickles away.

In final effect, and in spite of a jaunty and jaundiced point of view, "The Frogs of Spring" winds up as desultory entertainment. The play has its small treasures, but that lackadaisical air is hard to break through.

New York Post

October 21, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Comedy About Two Neighbors

The theater is a complex and deceptive medium. Comic ideas and inventions that sound humorous on the printed page have a cruel way of drying up when subjected to the practical test of presentation on the stage. All of this, I realize, is platitudinous, but it comes inevitably to mind because it shows what happened to "The Frogs of Spring," Nathaniel Benchley's dramatization of his own series of stories in the New Yorker, when it opened last night at the Broadhurst Theater. It just couldn't spring to properly hilarious theatrical life.

In "The Frogs of Spring," Mr. Benchley is telling, as he did in his magazine tales, of two husbands and wives who have homes side by side in New York and spend a great deal of time together in their adjoining gardens. One of the husbands is an advertising man and the other a writer; they are both men of humorous and rather prankish imagination, and they are something of a trial to their long-suffering spouses. Mr. Benchley, who is himself a man of humorous imagination, has tried to make a play out of their misadventures in friendship.

He has filled it with inventions that must have seemed good when they were being thought up. The husbands tear down the fence between the gardens and start to build it again. They bring on a swimming tank, and their wives get hold of some helium which makes their voices sound strange. The men start drinking with a neighbor and go off to Grant's Tomb where one of them is arrested and loses his job. The child of one of the neighbors wanders in and out of the scene causing considerable dismay, and the advertising man's wife threatens to leave him.

Some of the conceptions work out well. This, I think, is particularly true in the case of the neighbors. The fellow from next door, who is wrought up over the fact that vests no longer come with a suit of clothes, is a valuable addition to the evening, and so is the neighbor's child, who acts as a sort of sardonic Greek chorus to the proceedings. The stern and adult distaste of the children for the juvenile antics of their fathers is a pleasant feature of the occasion, and some of the dialogue is in the author's best vein.

A framework, however, is necessary for the comedy, and I'm sorry to say that a proper one is not forthcoming. When the wife of the advertising man threatens to leave him, it doesn't seem to arise from the circumstances of the story, but merely occurs because a complication is needed. And the two central figures, while they say and do funny things, never really come to life as human beings. The neighbors and a servant and her sweetheart seem considerably more alive. Furthermore, the fun is not consistent enough to make up for the other weaknesses.

An excellent cast has been gathered together for the comedy. Anthony Ross, invariably a good actor, and Hiram Sherman, one of the most original of the stage's light comedians, are the two husbands, and the wives are played by such talented actresses as Halla Stoddard and Barbara Baxley. Jerome Kilty is the neighbor with an interest in vests and Fred Gwynne is the maid's lugubrious sweetheart. All of them are excellent. Burgess Meredith has staged it ingeniously and Boris Aronson has provided one of his fine sets. But Mr. Benchley can be far funnier than his play indicates.

Daily Mirror

October 21, 1953

'The Frogs of Spring' At the Broadhurst

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Lyn Austin and Thomas Noyes have teamed with Robert Radnitz and Robert Sagalyn to give Nathaniel Benchley's "The Frogs of Spring" an admirable production at the Broadhurst Theatre. This is a light comedy, which Benchley penned after his delightful stories in the New Yorker.

HIS PEOPLE are frogs in a pond, the pond being the gardens behind adjacent brownstone houses in Manhattan. Elsewhere, Benchley has described them as cliff dwellers. They happen to be James Allen, a college professor; Charles Belden, an advertising executive; their respective wives, children and neighbors.

Allen and Belden have vivid imaginations. Were they more practical, they probably would be Thomas A. Edisons. As it is, they drive their spouses wacky by experimenting with helium gas, building an African native house on stilts for the kids and installing a monstrous swimming tank in the back yard.

After a friendly drinking session one evening, Allen and Belden journey up Riverside Drive to re-visit Grant's tomb and a nearby headstone inscribed "To an Amiable Child." A run-in with the gendarmes results in Belden's going to the hoosegow and losing his job. This infuriates Mrs. Belden, who insists they move back to the country. But in the end, she realizes that home is where you make it.

* * *

THE TROUBLE with "The Frogs of Spring" is that Benchley has written a vignette rather than a play. The characters are real and likable. The dialogue is sparkling. Some of the situations are hilarious. But these virtues are not focused to a dramatic purpose. There's too much froth and too little substance.

Austin and Noyes, who launched their season earlier with "Take a Giant Step," are among our more competent new producers. They know the theatre. They have a flair for finding superior craftsmen to carry out their ideas. Burgess Meredith, for instance, has directed the new arrival to emphasize all its values, while Boris Aronson has designed a charming set.

The cast is excellent. Anthony Rose and Hiram Sherman are wonderfully droll and human as the inventive neighbors. They play with ingratiating ease, never forcing their points. Halla Stoddard and Barbara Baxley are most attractive as their harassed wives. Roland Wood, Jerome Kilty, Fred Gwynne and Mary Grace Canfield are just right in other roles.

* * *

AND THERE'S A QUARTET of appealing and believable juveniles: Billy Quinn, Kenneth Kakos, Malcolm Brodrick and Kevin Coughlin. We particularly liked young Kevin as a wall-climbing, impish observer, philosopher and Greek Chorus.

"The Frogs of Spring" has so much to recommend it that we can only regret it hasn't quite enough. It does seem that Benchley could have found a few matters of more moment with which to tax his captivating crew of characters. They are really too fascinating to waste completely on trivia.

Anyway, we have this to be thankful for. Austin and Noyes have proved that they are capable of making important contributions to Broadway. They have taste and ability. As for Benchley, we are eagerly awaiting his next script. We trust that it will be as notable as "The Frogs" for wit and humor, but more solid and satisfying as theatre fare.

The New York Times

October 21, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In the first place, Nathaniel Benchley has a very fine attitude toward New York. His comedy, "The Frogs of Spring," put on at the Broadhurst last evening, portrays New York as a comic fantasy, compounded of an endless series of irrelevancies and populated by educated people who have never matured.

He is writing about the Allens and the Beldens who share garden apartments and involve each other in projects. Just on the spur of the moment, this column cannot explain to you how the two husbands happen to install a huge canvas swimming pool in the garden on the same day when the two wives are arranging a garden party with a tank of helium as the pièce de résistance.

But unless your correspondent was looking at two other plays last evening, that is the substance of Mr. Benchley's cock-eyed comedy. Other things happen. The Allens and Beldens are haunted by a neighborhood brat with a worldly mind and a contemptuous conversational style. A widower from an adjoining building barges in with a fanatical speech about the fact that double-breasted suits are sold nowadays without vests—a very fine indication of the state the world is in today. There is also some delirious stuff about a children's nurse who is in the throes of marrying a man who wants to save money on the wedding ceremony—a pretty cheap cad, obviously.

Items like this indicate the accuracy with which Mr. Benchley has captured the spirit of our great metropolis. Since he has a

silken literary style, his dialogue is as funny as his series of sprawling situations. But sooner or later all of us have to face the fact that "The Frogs of Spring" is unsubstantial and light to the point of emptiness in a good many places. It makes its way gaily from point to point on style alone.

In the form of prose sketches, the lack of substance did not matter and, in fact, was not apparent. But on the stage it gives an impression of being just one jump ahead of the negligible. "Tenuous" is the professional word for plays that suffer from low blood pressure.

Burgess Meredith might conceivably have helped by directing a neater, drier performance with greater emphasis on style for its own sake. As it is, the actors are pleasant in a way that seems reasonable but not hilarious. Taking Mr. Benchley's play at face value, Anthony Ross makes an affable fanatic out of James Allen, the man of projects; and Hiram Sherman, who is the model for all of George Price's drawings, attacks the part of Charles Belden in a spirit of hopeful incredulity.

As the apprehensive wives of the two lunatics, Haila Stoddard and Barbara Baxley are charming and worthy of more attention than they get. But the brief character parts are the most amusing in "The Frogs of Spring"—young Kevin Coughlin, as a grim sort of Greek chorus; Roland Wood, as an embarrassed man of pure science; Jerome Kilty, as the rebel against the swindling clothing industry; Mary Grace Canfield, as a glamorless bride with a literal mind, and Fred Gwynne, as a morose bridegroom. They all have good scenes which they act in styles that are happily close to caricature.

After shopping around appreciatively in other people's backyards, Boris Aronson has designed a city garden where the random insanities of New York culture feel at home. Well-bred insanity is Mr. Benchley's stock in trade, and he knows the right words for it. But his material is on the skimpy side, isn't it?

DAILY NEWS

October 21, 1953

'Frogs of Spring' Has Good Humor But Little Substance as a Comedy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Nathaniel Benchley's comedy, "The Frogs of Spring," which opened last evening at the Broadhurst Theatre, is a Manhattan backyard version of his colleague Wolcott Gibbs' Fire Island success, "Season in the Sun." Taken scene by scene and performance by performance it is smart, whimsical and funny, but taken as an entire evening in the theatre it becomes tenuous.

To put things plainly, this amiable little play needs more of a story line. Its director, Burgess Meredith, made Gibbs' disconnected sketches for "Season in the Sun" into a comedy which had a satisfying amount of movement and conflict; but Meredith has fared less well in dealing with the delightful incidents and characters in "The Frogs of Spring." Neither author Benchley nor director Meredith has managed to make an audience care or wonder about what is going to happen next—and if you don't care or wonder about what is going to happen next in the theatre your evening becomes an expensive letdown.

Community Playground.

Benchley's comedy is a courtyard idyll about two families living in small adjoining brownstones. Hiram Sherman and Barbara Baxley live in one of the houses and have a small son. Next door live Anthony Ross and Haila Stoddard with a couple of small sons. A wooden fence divides the rear yards. Messrs. Sherman and Ross, convivial gentlemen with similar tastes for beer and bourbon, decide to take the fence down and make the entire tenth of an acre into a vast playground for the kiddies.

The neighborly projects they devise include a makeshift tree-house on stilts in which the children show no interest and a portable swimming pool which becomes a public menace. Mmes. Stoddard and Baxley, the wives, don't share their husbands' enthusiasm. And that's about all there is to the plot, which isn't enough.

Separate Scenes Funny.

It is in its detailed scenes and in its acting that "The Frogs of Spring" is admirable. Benchley has a flair for offbeat, thrown-away humor and for catching people when they look ridiculous. His various passages between the two wives, between the two husbands and between husband and wife are human and humorous, and his comic invention is not lagging. I don't suppose anybody but Nathaniel Benchley would have thought of having two such lovelies as Miss Baxter and Miss Stoddard inhale helium gas from toy balloons and suffer an astonishing change of voice.

The minor characters of "The Frogs of Spring" fare better than the four principals do. My favorite scene among many really comic fragments is the one in which Mary Grace Canfield, a mousy and surly hired girl, makes plans for a wedding with Fred Gwynne, her lanky and loutish boy friend. Miss Canfield is delightful, and Gwynne, who played the hoodlum named Stinker in "Mrs. Me-Thing," is rapidly becoming my favorite comedian. Sherman and Ross, two actors of wide experience, have their best moments in a nonsensical drinking scene.

Boris Aronson has designed a picturesque backyard setting of many levels and ingenious uses.

Journal American

October 21, 1953

Sophisticated Comedy Fails to Go Anywhere

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE PEOPLE WHO INHABIT the small world which Nathaniel Benchley has created in "The Frogs of Spring" are the same types whose inanities fill the pages of the New Yorker magazine. They are all bright and enlightened, but they are about ten feet off the ground, living in a dizzy though amiable chaos rarely touched by the realities of life.

The women are brittle and disenchanted, they have long since resigned themselves to a losing battle with the vagaries of their husbands.

The men, regarding life as a gruesome prank, cling to one another in genial desperation, casting occasional sidelong glances at their wives and offspring. It is an atmosphere of extreme sophistication and considerable humor. But it doesn't seem to go anywhere.

In the platoon which Mr. Benchley fielded at the Broadhurst Theatre last night there are two couples, Mr. and Mrs. Allen and Mr. and Mrs. Belden, who happen to occupy houses side-by-side in New York City, the present. First they remove the fence to provide a larger communal back yard, then they erect a swimming pool.

In the course of this happy pre-occupation the husbands take to drink, make the acquaintance of another neighbor and repair to Grant's Tomb, thus missing the tenth anniversary surprise party planned by Mrs. Allen. It is that sort of thing.

There are side excursions along the way: the man who arrives with a helium tank, the small neighborhood urchin who confounds them at odd moments with irrefutable logic.

But in the ultimate analysis it is little more than a series of mild vignettes, neither hilarious nor incisive enough in themselves nor sufficiently profound in series to constitute a rewarding evening.

However, within this rather limited framework an extraordinary amount of talent has been applied.

There is no better master of the light line on the boards today than Anthony Ross, who plays Mr. Allen—unless it is Hiram Sherman, who plays Mr. Belden, and nobody could wish for two more competent wives than Haila Stoddard and Barbara Baxley.

Deft Direction

Add to these the singular aptitudes of Jerome Kilty, as the man from the laboratory; Fred Gwynne, as the imbecile fiance of Mary Grace Canfield, the maid; and a large assortment of brilliant kid actors. Not forgetting the deft direction of Burgess Meredith and a strikingly authentic set by Boris Aronson.

Mr. Benchley has an acknowledged gift for dialogue, for brief comic situation and by-play. One hopes he will one day write a play with greater range, concerned with people of more substance.

"End as a Man"

"End as a Man" opened downtown at the Theatre de Lys September 15, 1953 and moved uptown to the Vanderbilt Theatre October 14, 1953. Please note that some of the following reviews are of the original opening and some of the later, October 14th, date.

Journal American

October 17, 1953

Move Uptown Fails To Improve Drama

By JOHN McCLAIN

WHEN the Calder Willingham play, "End As a Man," opened down in Greenwich Village most of the drama reviewers agreed that it had unusual merit and a few of us were bold enough to venture that with a little floss and fixin' it might go very well on Broadway.

In any event, they did bring it uptown, to the Vanderbilt Theatre, where it had the misfortune of opening on the same evening that Betty Hutton bowed into the Palace. I saw it last night in its new location, with bright costumes and sets and a full-sized stage to move about in.

To me it is still a powerful and moving play, with one of the season's stand-out performances by a brilliant young man named Ben Gazzara, but somebody has done a lot of rewriting since I first saw it and I'm afraid the result has weakened rather than strengthened the basic structure.

The problem at hand is that of a brilliant bully in a Southern military college, whose elaborate plots against the student commandant lead to the almost-fatal injury of one student and the court martial and dismissal of himself and three others.

Change of Theme

In this version the fifth student implicated actually an innocent by-stander who refused to inform on the bully, walks out of the court martial with the remark that he'd rather quit "and BE a man."

This left me in a state of complete confusion. Down in the Village the whole point of the play seemed to be that despite the absurd conduct of a small group in a school of that kind the great majority withstood the rigors of discipline and Ended as Men.

This was clearly pointed out by the Old General in a speech to the innocent bystander. And at the final curtain the innocent bystander is given another opportunity to stay in school and prove himself.

Now the emphasis is all the other way. "End As A Man" becomes a satirical term and the moral, if any, is that such schools are sadistic and moronic, and the only way to "End As A Man" is to get the hell out.

Slightly Mixed Up

I am not prepared to argue that this latter idea is not the better one, but I don't think the conversion job has been completely realized. You can't make such a fundamental change with a few new speeches; the trouble is deeper than that.

The audience is led to believe in the wisdom and integrity of the Commandant, the Old General, and in the traditions of the school. Then, in the last act, they all come apart at the seams and we find ourselves applauding when the kid turns his back on the premises.

Incidentally, there is a sign in front of the theatre which reads: "Best Play Of The Year" —John McClain.

That was written six weeks ago, when the theatrical year was young, and does not apply to the production as of this date or in its current form.

The show is still well worth a visit, but I'm afraid it got slightly mixed-up in the long voyage uptown.

"END AS A MAN"

Play by Calder Willingham, based on his book of the same name; staged by Jack Garfein; scenery by Mel Bourne; presented by Claire Heller downtown at the Theatre de Lys, September 15, 1953, moved uptown to the Vanderbilt Theatre, October 14, 1953. The cast:

Robert Marquales..... William Smithers
Maurice Maynall Simmons... Arthur Storch
Harold Kobie..... Pat Hingle
Jocko De Paris.... Ben Gazzara
Perrin McKee... Paul Richards
1st Orderly..... Al Mifelow
2nd Orderly..... Richard Vogel
Starkson.... Anthony Franciosa
Larrence Corger..... Mark Richman
General Draughton..... Frank M. Thomas
Roger Gatt..... Albert Salmi
Cadet Officers.... Steven Ross, Eli Rill and Richard Hym

Daily Mirror

September 16, 1953

'End As A Man' Pleases At Theatre De Lys

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The off-Broadway theatre movement stuck another proud feather in its cap last evening when Claire Heller presented Calder Willingham's "End As A Man" at Theatre De Lys. Based on a best-selling novel, it is a tense, absorbing often amusing study of how military schools turn boys into men.

Having attended a military school ourself, we were of the opinion early in the proceedings that Willingham was stacking the cards against such institutions. That he was writing an indictment of rather than an understanding play about them. But as the script unfolded, we realized that he was concentrating his fire on the weaklings and mischief-makers rather than the capable and the competent cadets.

WILLINGHAM is primarily concerned with Jocko de Paris, a wealthy, spoiled, sinister lad. Because his dad has befriended the school, Jocko thinks that he's a privileged character. His innate intelligence is marred by a selfish and sadistic streak. He hazes freshmen with savage cruelty, attempts to frame the innocent, gullible and successful.

He is determined to wreck the academy, if its commandant has the courage and integrity to discipline him. And General Draughton has both. He expels Jocko, though the young Machiavelli threatens that his important father will withdraw his valued support. He also has to dispose of, regretfully, several of Jocko's spineless victims.

Jocko is a fascinating heel. He reminds you a little of the vicious brat in "The Children's Hour." But he's made of sterner and more destructive stuff. You feel that he will go on to wreak even more havoc in the future. He is likely to become a synonym for monster.

BEN GAZZARA gives a brilliant performance as the wilful, arrogant Jocko. William Smithers is excellent as a well-meaning dupe. He really stirred the first-nighters with his sincerity in the third act. Paul Richards is perfect as an effete intellectual. Albert Salmi is quite wonderful as a dumb, rakish football tackle.

Arthur Storch is eminently right as a serious lad who cannot withstand the rigors of military discipline. Frank M. Thomas, the only veteran in the cast, makes General Draughton a human being, a man of feeling with a high sense of responsibility for America's youth.

Salutes also are due Pat Hingle, Al Mifelow, Richard Vogel, Anthony Franciosa, Mark Richman, Steven Ross, Eli Rill and Richard Hym for their contributions. And a grateful bow must go to director Jack Garfein. Mel Bourne has designed a serviceable set.

THE AISLE-SITTERS have taken some unmerciful beatings in the past at off-Broadway playhouses. They also have had the thrill of discovering distinguished playwrights and players in them. We have always defended these groups, for we believe them to be the proving ground for talent so sorely needed by our commercial theatre.

In fact, some philanthropist should erect a monument to the valiant experimentalists of the off-Broadway movement. Better yet, he should subsidize it. How "End as a Man" eluded the attention of our Main Stem producers is a mystery to us. But we are thankful that Miss Heller has found a home for it, even though it be a few blocks below Duffy Square.

The New York Times

September 16, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Out of his own novel Calder Willingham has written an uneven though remarkably interesting play, "End As a Man," which was acted at Theatre de Lys in the Village last evening. It is the harsh and horrifying story of life in a Southern military academy. To get the negative news out of the way immediately, the play goes to pieces during the second act. Mr. Willingham dwells on the note of cupidity and violence to a point where it loses dramatic significance. There is quite a long stretch when "End As a Man," losing momentum as a play, settles down into a scene of raucous squalor.

* * *

But the final act recovers the severity of the opening parts of the play. And the acting is so vivid that by the time the last act is over you are likely to forget the generalities of the middle scenes. For Mr. Willingham has drawn his characters brilliantly, not as types, but as individual boys reacting vigorously to the tyranny of a brutish school system.

There is the sadistic, though generally ingratiating bully, Jocko De Paris, who pulls a lot of his associates into a catastrophe. There is the creep, the aesthete and intellectual, the thick-headed football player and the generally agreeable freshman who gets drawn into disaster against his will. Apparently Mr. Willingham has a soft spot in his heart for that innocent freshman. But all the other characters range from objectionable to monstrous.

* * *

The inhuman system of the school is the protagonist. In the play the commanding general is a good deal more benign than he was in the novel. He brings into the play an influence that is mature and paternal. But he does not protect the freshmen from the subtle, almost psychiatric corruption of Jocko De Paris—a much abler boy than any of the others and a malevolent one, also.

In the last part of the second act "End as a Man" succumbs to the violence and degradation of the school system, as though the author could not detach himself from it and write about it with a point of view. But he writes the first act with humor and sympathy. He writes an amusing second-act scene about a stupid, egotistic football player who does not realize that his leg is being pulled. And the last austere and rigid portrait of a court-martial scene is written with effective bluntness and economy.

Like the play, the performance, directed by Jack Garfein, is uneven. It is soft in the early scenes until Frank M. Thomas, an experienced professional, walks into it as the commanding general; and the performance is a shambles in the second-act party scene when the play explodes in all directions.

But there is some extraordinary acting in most of the principal parts. Ben Gazzara is superb as Jocko De Paris. Jocko is attractive, clever and alert on the surface, but evil at the core; and Mr. Gazzara's acting perfectly expresses this ambivalence. You have to know Jocko very well before you can despise him. There is some splendid acting in other roles — Arthur Storch, as the toothy creep with a weakness toward piety; William Smithers, as the freshman who takes his lumps like a man; Albert Salmi, as the dim-witted football player; Paul Richards as the treacherous snob.

Making use of every square foot of a small stage, Mel Bourne has designed utilitarian sets that give the drama its proper atmosphere of barrenness and rigor. Despite the one sequence when play and performance flounder, "End As a Man" has a lot of freshness and vitality. The barely controlled ferocity of life in Mr. Willingham's military school keeps his writing sharp and alive.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 16, 1953

'End as a Man' Is Raw, Sinister

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new production at the Theater DeLys on Christopher St., is one of the most fascinating displays of unfamiliar talent I have ever seen.

"End as a Man" is tough stuff. It is an exposition of life in a military school, told in bald, harsh language. The play is often as hypnotic as being shut up in a basket full of cobras. It has many faults, but each of them increases the challenge to the actors.

The conflict is superficially between upper classmen and novices. More deeply, it is the test each applicant undergoes, in terms of discipline and hazing, to prove whether he can be the kind of man an Army officer should be.

Revenge Motive.

The stringent barracks life refines each man's dominant character. "End as a Man" emphasizes less admirable types. The son of a benefactor of the academy is a vain and psychopathic sadist. He nearly causes the death of a moronic football player, to revenge himself on the sportsman's roommate.

Two new men, and other upperclassmen, are involved in the elaborate escapade, and they are winnowed out. As is so often the trouble with such a situation, the good men are not nearly as interesting as the evil ones, so are not really more sympathetic.

Calder Willingham has dramatized his own novel to make this play, and it has a great deal of ugly force. The faults are dramaturgical. The characters do not overtly change. They are developed one at a time, in lumpy speeches, rather than in reaction to each other, coincidentally.

Focus on Evil.

The focus is too concentratedly on the wicked character, to let the commanding officer's resplendant climatic speech ring entirely true. Yet all of this forces the actors into sustaining characters and scenes in unusual measure.

The most striking performance, and the meatiest part, is that of the chief troublemaker, played with contemptuous, scheming alertness by Ben Gazzara. He exudes cold, quiet wickedness until the hysterical and unreasoning finish.

William Smithers makes a powerful impression with the more pallid role of the new man who is permitted another chance despite his involvement in a mass infringement of regulations. Frank M. Thomas plays with unexceptional taste and effect as the General, who is frequently called on to explain Army life in numerous words.

Sinister Success.

Arthur Storch leaves an unforgettable impression as the weakling who is simply a misfit, and Paul Richards is equally successful in portraying the sinister quality of a toadying cadet with a crush on the chief troublemaker. Mark Richman gives surprising impact to the role of an upright upperclassman.

As the simple-minded football player, Albert Salmi has a lengthy drunk scene and fight which is an extraordinary tour de force. As a hot-tempered monster he achieves a merciless physical degradation.

The direction by Jack Garfein is resourceful, authentic and suspenseful, letting personalities fascinate you if physical action lags.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 16, 1953

THEATER

'End as a Man'

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE is a great deal that is worth seeing and worth saving in the new play at the Theater de Lys. Down in the Village, a group of young peformers who have been working together at the Actors' Studio have now taken over Calder Willingham's dramatization of his own novel, "End as a Man." They are giving it a shrewd, studied, and thoroughly sensitive performance.

The play itself, though still in the workshop stage, is steadily interesting. Dealing with life in a Southern military school, it digs into such matters as the sadism inherent in hazing, minor-league homosexuality and the disciplinary problems involved making sure that raw and erratic cadets do end as men.

* * *

The materials are highly specialized, and Mr. Willingham has pursued them so unflaggingly—and with so little cross-interest of any kind—that the evening becomes seriously repetitive some time before it is done. After a first act filled with observant character and accurate late-adolescent speech, the author lets himself become carried away by his ear for the vernacular. His cadets settle down to still more casual conversation, to the further hazing of freshmen, and to an immensely funny but dramatically unprogressive interlude with a magnificently lamebrained football player. The final stages of the piece, in which no fewer than five of the principals are hauled up for court martial, snap back into genuine tension